


*Once Upon a Time...*

# *Two*



*Poems and Tales by Mary S. Burgess*



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*Two*

## **What readers say about *Handbook of Hope* —**

“This book was a life-saver for our family after we lost our son to suicide ... The handbook helped us better understand that the pain and heartache we were experiencing were normal and that there is hope for survival.”

-Janet Groff, Mother

“In this brief but useful book, Mary Burgess helps bereaved readers to ‘say yes to life again’ by providing practical advice ... for all aspects of grief: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Many will benefit from her work.”

-Rita M. Bonchek, Ph.D., Grief Therapist

“At the darkest moment of my life, a total stranger reached out to me with her *Handbook of Hope*. Only someone who has experienced the suicide of a loved one could write these clear and loving words ... Keep your copy close ... Refer to it often. You are not alone.”

-Debra Lloyd, Mother

“With empathy and humor, Mary Burgess has written a survival guide for those who have lost a loved one to suicide. I strongly recommend this book to anyone in that unfortunate situation.”

-Larien G. Bieber, M.D., F.A.C.P.

“Readily accessible aid for surviving a suicide is well outlined in *Handbook of Hope*. It is a testimony to the author’s effective and positive use of spiritual and personal resources. As one who has felt her pain and rejoiced in her healing, I can say she has practiced what she has preached.”

-Carl J. Frederick, M.Div., Pastor

*Once Upon a Time...*  
*Two*

*Poems and Tales*  
*by*  
*Mary S. Burgess*

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## DEDICATION

Dedicated to all children who give  
heart-stopping,  
in-your-face,  
never-say-die  
moments and memories to their parents.

*Your children are not your children... You are the  
bows from which your children as living arrows are  
sent forth.*

—Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

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- to Mattie Hillard, for cover photo, for telling me I wrote my first poem at age six, and for setting the best example of motherhood; creative in her own right, and my best friend for over 45 years.

## **The Men in My Life**

God, who created me.

Daddy who gave me life, two years of it, and Jim,  
my brother, who overcame adversity time after time.  
Jimmy, my “boyfriend” in first grade and Gene,  
my first real love.

Ted, who gave me twenty-four years and  
Tom and Scott, who give me reason for living.  
Keith: father, brother, lover, friend, gave  
the best seventeen years of my life.  
Joe bestowed “love” and pain, and Frank,  
so kind and chaste, gave the sweetest kisses.

God, who sustains me,  
always.

## Courage, Stubbornness

Ded. to Keith, Scott, Tom, Shirley, Fred, Jim, FDR  
and (insert your name) \_\_\_\_\_

“You have such courage,” my friend said, noting  
perseverance through illness. “What choice do  
I have if I don’t want to become an invalid?”

Courage is what the Wright Brothers had at Kitty Hawk,  
what an astronaut has every time he steps  
into a space craft,  
what a surgeon prays for every time she opens a skull,  
and what parents have when they bring  
a child into the world.

## Identification

O, womb, while you build for your embryo,  
You create a wall for me  
Layered with awe and curiosity and wonder.

O, embryo, I too hear the sea sounds of ages past.  
I too match your passiveness  
Within a buoyant bubble  
Protected from mundane things.

O, foetal thing, my joy and pain mingle now  
Like our blood and sweat.  
You are wrested from your nest  
And struggle through the rigid valley  
To meet the unknown.

Babe, you are no stranger.  
You rest now in my arms instead of my loins.  
The cord is gone, but feed now at my breast.  
In a few ticks of eternity's clock  
I shall lose you and you me.  
What we've lost, we'll find in another.



## To Tom: Let Us Thank Ferde Grofe

Zap!

Crack!

Your small-boy shrieks match  
blue-white shards stab-  
bing the sky (my  
tremors the rumble of thunder. Can you  
feel them as you cling for safety?)

Torrents now—your tears  
and the rain—assault. We can only endure till  
the terrible beauty subsides, ends.

We smell sweet air, hear birdsong,  
see glistening leaves,  
and still sobs shake the world.

On a winter day, music magic—  
Part V, “Cloudburst,” *Grand Canyon Suite*:  
tympanic thunder, stringed winds,  
cascades of brasses,  
cymbaled, glissandoed lightning  
(harmless zaps)—  
echoes awe.

Now we know next summer we’ll prevail  
and hear the rainbow in the storm.

## Grocer's Picnic—July, 1959

Determined to have you see the ocean at eight,  
before eleven, my age,  
I sign us up for the Grocer's Picnic,  
the annual local trip to Atlantic City.

Some say it will soon be stopped, this gift  
to the community offered for next to nothing.

We board at 7 a.m. along with so many others  
I fear we'll have to stand.  
It wouldn't matter to you: it's a train!  
an old and dusty (as it turns out) train.  
But a train!

Your first trip to the shore, *our* first trip on a train!

In an hour we slow, then jostle our way  
off to a grey, off-and-on misty day.

The first order of business: to go to the beach  
and see the waves, *hear* the waves  
thunder and crash and chase each other  
back to the ocean, the green and grey ocean.

I spread a towel, we remove our shoes and socks  
and run to the water.

Ooh! It's cold! It's July, but it's so cold.

We remove our outer clothes  
and I show you how to splash.

We have no pail or shovel to build a sand castle,  
so we splash and chase each other in the surf.

We stand and let the timeless tug of gravity  
try to pull us deep into the ocean  
then laugh at the cups of water  
our heels make in the sand.

The rain comes harder, but no matter, there's the  
STEEL PIER!

A dollar apiece to see freaks  
and Ripley's Wonders  
and play pinball  
and see a movie  
and hear music with a crazy Italian band leader,  
Louie Prima,  
with an even crazier wife  
and eat squashed, soggy peanut butter sandwiches  
and pay an extra dollar  
to see the horse jump not into the ocean  
that roars just beyond  
but into a tiny pail of water, Folks,  
    thousands!  
        of feet below.  
He makes hardly a splash.

We clap and stamp our feet  
as the horse climbs back out and  
is hauled back up to the tiny platform  
to jump to his doom again for  
the four o'clock show.

We board again, sweaty and tired, crowded out  
by others' odors and souvenirs:  
giant white plastic kewpie dolls  
in satiny sequiny pink with yellow hair  
and huge red-orange-yellow-green-blue  
terry and plastic beach balls  
hard-won at three-for-a-quarter in the arcade.

We clutch our collection of seashells  
dug from the wet grey sand that cost us nothing  
but an enchanting walk on the beach,  
our hair smelling of salt  
neither of us will ever wash away.

## Traps

Idly I hook my arm over the railing at the end of the pool so I can do leg exercises while talking with two swimmates. Then—ogod!—I'm stuck! My elbow has slipped below the rail and won't move. The harder I try to lift it, the more tightly it is wedged. Swimmates come to the rescue but don't know what to do either.

Finally I take a deep breath, blow it out, and my elbow slips out as easily as a greased hot dog. How did you know what to do? one asks. I suddenly brighten. I'd forgotten about my son getting stuck, some forty-some years ago.

When he was about three, we took him along with his brother to the bus station. Tom was going to visit Uncle John in Baltimore for a week, and the bus was late. Others kept arriving, but no "Baltimore" in the front window.

Just as one finally appears on the horizon, around the corner, we notice Scott at a grate with many round holes, many small, round holes. Scott, being very, very curious, had at that time the habit of poking his finger into everything, hot or cold, soft or hard, short or long, big or small. This one was hard, very hard, and small and not yielding to one tiny finger one tiny bit. We told him not to pull. Meantime, the bus driver with his door open, waits for Tom to board.



He sees our dilemma and suggests calling the fire department. "Okay, Tom, you go," we say. "It'll be fine. Call us when you get there, and we'll tell you how things turned out. 'Bye, Honey. Have a good time. Love you!"

I picture the fire department coming and my little boy wearing a large iron ring around his index finger for a lifetime.

My husband suggests soap. "Good idea, but we don't have any." And this being the days before liquid soap, I'm not sure how we'd rub soap on the part that needs it.

Scott is the only one not panicking. He keeps looking at his finger, feeling the cold metal around it (no doubt counting how many atoms are circling in the iron in those square inches). He tries to wiggle it, realizing there are parts that will not wiggle and stops, just looking at his father and me with a puzzled expression.

I have a brainstorm. "Scott, Honey, just relax and then take a deep breath, like you're going to blow up a balloon, then blow up the balloon and your finger will come out." On the third try (for some reason miracles happen in three's), the finger slips out as easily as a greased hot dog, intact, of course, just a bit swollen, all in a day's experiment.

## Fellows

In 1956 when he's with me in a supermarket in the ghettoized Southeast Area (where I grew up), Tom asks, "Mommy, why is she black?" of a fellow shopper. I answer, "Because God makes people different colors," but the four-year old repeats the question several times and again while we're in line waiting for the same fellow shopper to be checked out.

Before I can say anything, she says, "Hmph! If parents would teach their children right, they wouldn't be so rude."

I realize he's never seen, in the "white" part of town where he's growing up, anyone of a different race. Nor on television.

I take her words to heart, and we begin to welcome to our home people of different cultures and experiences.

First, a dark-skinned man, a fellow student to whom I'd given a ride. He tells, in his excellent English, his father owns a sugar plantation in India, but he will become an entrepreneur of a very successful electrical supply store in the area.

A Japanese family of three moves next door, their older boy, five, and our four-year old become

inseparable, so that when we go away at the end of that first week, Ernie sits at their picture window, waiting for Scott to come home. An older neighbor boy rides past our driveway many times calling Ernie a dirty Jap. Scott tells him to go home, the war is over. By the time their Kelly arrives, the neighborhood fully accepts these fellow citizens. With their Tonkas the boys re-landscape our backyard, and Scott and Ernie wonder why there's no "coolth" when there's "warmth."

Later a blind man, a friend of a distant relative, is our guest. This college lecturer, shows how he uses his cane to sense obstacles and tells us that he fell in love with his wife's voice and skin. He has never seen her, of course, but doesn't need to, he says.

In 1965 I begin volunteering for our local Fair Housing Committee which works to find homes for blacks out of the ghetto. I take my three-year old along with books, and when I'm not busy on the phone, I sit on the front porch of the ghetto house and read to my son and children from the neighborhood. They are fascinated with Scott's straight brown hair and he with their kinky black heads.

We are all devastated when Martin Luther King, Jr., is assassinated. I invite Mary Brown, fellow volunteer at Fair Housing, for supper. She says it would be less militant if it were Brown Power, instead of Black Power.

Donald, white, then Bruce, black, come for two-week Shared Holidays. Donald, oldest of five children, asks before we're even home, "Do you have grass?"

Each visits separately for two summers in a row.

Bruce, youngest of thirteen, and Scott stage shows in our basement for the neighborhood children, lip-synching to “Puff, the Magic Dragon” or plinking the piano, singing, and dancing. Comedian Bruce charms everyone. He wants to be a jazz trumpeter, but because he’s the biggest fourth-grader, he’s given the tuba.

When he moves to a different county and a bigger house, he invites Scott for a weekend. They sleep on the third floor and eat in shifts—there are grandchildren in this happy family, too.

King’s assassination triggered three days of rioting in our community, too. On Sunday pastor announces a reconciliation service will be held downtown on the courthouse steps. I announce at lunch I am going. When Tom, fifteen, wants to go, I ask him why, wondering if it’s just curiosity. “I want to show my support, too,” he says.

I am glad for it, as a phalanx of mostly black persons marches from the ghetto to the courthouse while mostly whites gather across the street. Some speeches are angry, most are healing, by blacks and whites. The many blacks massed on the steps have every opportunity, despite police presence, to shoot or firebomb us.

Yet nothing dangerous happens, and I am proud of my city, my teen son, and *Human Power*, for we have stepped into a future where many now recognize that we are on this earth together, fellows all.

## Hand

This hand that hit can knit,  
create, sedate, spin  
a web so loose, seduce.

Silk-sheathed tool,  
alone it weaves both love and hate—  
the loom my child—target  
of this swift bone.



## Spider

When he was three, Scott was afraid of dogs,  
and the cat didn't work out, it being feral.

He came one day, a spider in his hand:  
Mom, can I keep him?  
We found a jar, and he had a pet!

He caught several more and took them to  
Bible School on Pet Day. How heartbroken he was  
when I told him he had to let them go.

I never, ever kill a spider—they eat thousand-legger eggs—  
and brought a little boy such joy.

I saw a web, sparkling with dew, on my morning walk  
today, stretched from the top of someone's mailbox  
to a tree across the sidewalk, maybe fifteen feet,  
and ducked under it,  
marvel of the universe.

## **Before Walking**

My first didn't walk till he was thirteen months—we worried for three, but then, in spite of his baby fat he toddled fine across the rug.

The second became very fussy around eight months. Blaming it on colic, we dismissed it, but worried when other off-behaviors came on frustrations' heels.

He had almost skipped crawling (later I learned that was not a good sign, often verbal and mental delays followed that lack), but he was already pulling himself up on the sofa easily, looking around and smiling, proud of himself.

I learned to trust his inborn instincts would serve him well and didn't as carefully monitor his movement for safety as I had his brother's.

At nine months he started walking—toward his brother, ten years older. So that's what this frustration was all about! He was yearning inside to develop, and it wasn't happening soon enough.

He played floor hockey for awhile, getting his name in the paper for the many goals he saved, then ice hockey in the same capacity with the same good results.

Early development—coordination, ability, drive and lean-ness—manifested over the next many years, far beyond a little nine-month old toddler's early effort.

## Pine

Sturdy, sturdy sentinel, old now,  
touching—almost—God.  
Winds and rains do not sway, though one limb  
is the worse from some storm.

I get out my watercolors, the little black tray,  
put in a few drops of water, wet the paper  
and the camel's hair brush I spent  
bread money on,  
and in Cowan's Gap  
try to be faithful to God's majesty.

The adirondack is not comfortable,  
the sun beats too hotly, the children call to walk  
in the woods, but the paper is wet now and  
may not dampen well again, so I excuse myself  
and paint on.

"Ooh!" one says when I am nearly done.  
"Mom," the other exclaims, "I didn't  
know you like to paint."  
"I'm not sure I do, Sweetheart,"  
but do not give him the many reasons  
it can be easy and hard both.

Then we walk in the woods,  
looking for others of God's sentinels,  
more precious than paper ones.

## Croquet and Miniature Golf

The men in my family could beat me in just about any sport, and I am not a gracious loser.

Still, I swell with pride when I see the boys plan a 24-hour croquet tournament for the neighborhood, big brother always wanting to lead in providing wholesome fun for his little brother and his friends—and perhaps reap some joy in the process.

They spread the word, take down the pup tent they crowd into on hot summer nights, rig up lights, enlist next door neighbors' aid, solicit prizes, and polish the wooden set to a golden luster.

And they come: big and little, male and female, young and old (the old to watch these social engineers).

The miniature golf tournament will be next Wednesday. Come and enjoy yourself.

## History Lessons

The radio brings tears with news  
in '56 of the Salk vaccine—  
no polio for my little boy!

and again, in '62 tears of joy  
with John Glenn's  
space flight.

With t.v. in '69 at night  
all four of us open our eyes  
and hardly talk

of the marvelous walk  
Armstrong makes  
on the moon.

In no time soon  
our two will be in  
television and medicine—

as camera man and 'lectrician!



## Magi

*Out of the mouths of babes....*

The two-year old says ah-me-mah-moo (hippopotamus) and hop-dop (helicopter), and we laugh.

The five-year old: Celery for salary when I tell him what I make as church secretary when the pastor and his wife come for supper. Also I've told him Pastor John can't smell anymore, so he says,  
My mom says you don't smell so good.

The ten-year old says, Why do they kill people?,  
the Ten Commandments having taken hold.

The fifteen-year old: Going to Canada? Yes, I'll be a draft dodger! I'm not serving in no g.d. war!  
I'm not dyin' for nobody in no g.d. helicopter!  
We don't belong over there!

Six years later, he says. Mom, I can't believe he's going, as his best buddy goes, goes to Saigon, goes to Hanoi, goes to the skies over a once-beautiful land.

The twenty-two,  
twenty-three,  
twenty-four year olds go to church and cry  
when they hear the letter:  
Mom, please don't worry about me. I'm fine.  
I'm doing well—the Huey is the best thing that ever  
happened to me.

## Sports

Baseball is the number one sport I enjoy, along with hockey, two seemingly dissimilar activities: one so slow and non-violent—hockey—the other fast, reckless, dangerous—baseball players slam each other against the boards too.

We were a baseball family.

My dad's side always played it, softball, that is, at annual reunions. Great-uncles hitting, catching, pitching to four-and five-year olds, boys and girls. Mothers and fathers too, mostly cheering from the sidelines. The only thing Uncle John, Uncle Fred and Uncle Carl didn't do was slide into base, it being a little hard on the arthritis—unless it was home plate.

I heard tales all my life of my dad's left-handed pitching in a semi-pro league when he wasn't at the printing press. I like to imagine him winding up his left arm, winking at his family in the bleachers, a "watch-this-fast-ball" wink. I never saw that wink unless he did it before I turned three.

Mother kept the spirit alive in taking us to our local farm team games affiliated with the Philadelphia A's. We saw Nellie Fox scoop 'em out of the dirt at shortstop before he became famous.

Tom tried baseball at age 11 when his dad coached a Little League team, but it wasn't his thing. He quit cross-country in Middle School when he got pneumonia running in thirty degrees at six a.m.

Hockey's in the family too. My husband played, reffed, and coached it, so naturally Scott took to it at age nine—as a goalie after great success in floor hockey. We lost one iron and the spool spindle on the sewing machine to basement floor practices.

At his first ice hockey game he came waddlin' out with all that padding, and I thought he'd be safe down at his end of the rink. Nevertheless I yelled, "Get it, Scott!" and "C'mon, stop it, Scott" and "You can do it!" I couldn't catch his look behind that mask, but I heard it later when he tried to ban me from future games.

Didn't work, of course, till he stopped playing at age sixteen. Too bad. He was good, too—helped his team win trophies, though he was so modest you'd never have heard it from him—his ninety pounds wearing forty pounds of leather.

## On Greta, By Scott

Get a divorce, I'd say when they bickered,  
but I never thought they would.  
Then I got sick and Greta at the same time.  
For three days she nursed me back and eased  
my hurt with nose nuzzles and puppy-trust.

She went frantic when I finally went out to play,  
Mom said, knocking down lamps and plants  
to see me through the window. I understood and  
took her everywhere, almost. She'd run off to find  
me, Mom said, so I'd hunt and hunt.  
While her tail-less rear wagged joy, love from  
those big light-brown jello eyes and warm  
sandpaper tongue bathed me.

We delivered newspapers by skateboard, wore  
paths chasing bones, sticks, frisbees, and  
I-don't-know-what, waded the stream—she stunk  
so bad she couldn't sleep in my bed till the dreaded  
hose made her fit again, collaborated on peas and  
carrots and liver (Mom said, My, your eating has  
improved), kept company in the backyard tent  
for three summers' nights.

I ran off more and more chasing I-don't-know-what.  
She'd follow and I'd take her back,  
slamming the door shut to lock her home.  
Go die, I half-wished.  
But I never thought she would.

## Students and Teachers

Till hepatitis intervened, Scott and I both were to start school full-time, he first grade and I my second year of college having completed the first in night classes for three years. For three months I was his teacher, I, who was studying to teach English to junior and senior high students.

He did better with his first grade teacher than with me, though I developed an interest in how to teach reading without relying so heavily on boring workbooks. He already knew how to read but still had to complete "Pages 20-25 for Thursday" on the f/ph sound.

Until Tom's sophomore year, he worked below his potential, except for science classes. In tenth grade he got turned on by a sociology teacher who took the class on field trips to the prison, soup kitchens, a ghetto school, the local welfare office, a courtroom, and a hospital clinic, followed by lively discussion.

He regretted his past lack of interest in academics, for now he thought he'd like to be a Social Worker, not an electrician. The sociology class inspired better work in English, history, and math, too.

One evening he asked me what I was studying as I prepared for a final I knew would be tough. I explained that the lit prof's reputation as fair but hard was true—I'd only pulled a C by mid-terms and needed A's and B's to stay in my major. That began our studying together at the kitchen table. He learned the benefits of

not waiting till the last minute to study. I learned how helpful it was to have a study buddy.

I gave give him multiple-choice, true-and-false, and sentence completion questions or essay topics in his subjects. He'd formulate questions for me for essay questions. Together we learned the value of predicting essay questions and outlining in-depth answers.

At 18, he graduated from high school, two years before I got my B. S. at 40. No one applauded louder than Tom when I received my sheepskin, *Magna cum Laude*.

## Gull

Gull, you're one of the stupidest birds,  
they say:        you've added  
                     to our fools' words.  
                     But able and  
         graceful, you know well  
when to sweep,        dip,    glide,  
                     or ride the swell.  
It's true you snatch the  
                             bread I throw,  
though bread is not the best you know.

With each snatch you lower your feet;  
      betrayed of instinct, you meet  
in your gull's brain  
              the one "fish"  
      —even if only a wish—  
              meant to help you to survive.  
Food—fish or bread—keeps you alive.

The question I ask: "Who is the fool?  
Is it you, or I who break your rule?"  
They say, "Survive  
                      on wishes like these,  
              you'll be adrift on perilous seas."  
I choose to wish, to ride your swell  
      no matter what the others tell.  
              For wishes are instincts too, say I:  
      being alive's  
the best way.

(Written during trip with Scott, 14, my navigator and  
fellow beachcomber at Long Beach Island, NJ, 1976)



## Death of a Mussel

Glistening mussel, your nates met,  
but curving outward like  
monarch wings,  
embedded in the sand,  
your carnal parts  
sacrificed to the gulls,  
Is your soul away or does it stay  
in your rippled butterfly wings?

The young boy's muscles ripple yet,  
bivalved beneath wet suit.  
His voice sings,  
rings, reigns over the surf.  
His carnate parts  
conceal, reveal a soul.

So it will be, sweet mystery,  
when muscles die and no voice sings.

(Written at Long Beach Island, 1976, revised 2009)

## Starfish, a Resurrection

You are the dearest treasure of my beachcombing days.  
Joy almost equaled pleasure when first I saw your rays  
curling, swirling in the tide. Then I plucked you from  
your  
sea, not knowing whether I'd gotten you alive or  
dead, till you writhed in my hand and I knew. Yet you'd  
be a fine specimen—on land—for my collection from the sea.

On a holey, T-shaped shell, fragmented, I then placed  
you, hoping your death went well, easy, painless. I faced  
your probing arms, each nail piercing shell, not my palm.  
Your orange eye, without fail unblinking, scanned sky,  
calm.

Topside, protective spines crowned your skin of purple  
dye.  
(Those thorns ever still surround that seeing, orange,  
sun-like eye.)

To ease my stealing the sea, your element, you were  
placed in my shadow. (When He thirsts, he gets vinegar.)  
And besides, it might have made your purple color stay,  
rather than fade, in such shade. Yet fading is death's  
way.

I tried to straighten an arm and leg to keep your star-  
like shape, shaping, without harm I hoped, your reach  
to far  
points, your perfect total: five. Then, as you struggled  
less,  
stiffened more, became less live, I hastened finalness  
with mercy, letting the sun heat that hard, spiny robe

and that open, orange, one eye: space—my face—to probe.

Then, again thinking I still might save your royal shade,  
I covered you, in an ill-begotten man-made thought,  
and made—

after some three hours—a room without merciless sun:  
a white curving clamshell tomb for you, a perfect  
specimen.

You are too special to join the other collection  
items. I mount you now on gilt-edged mirror: your  
reflection  
shows your nails. And still we see your pointing arms,  
your eye.

While I am mounting you, he—my son—comes in and  
asks if I  
intend to add other shells we've found from near and far.  
Then his prophet voice foretells: Oh, look!  
It is a Christmas star!

(Long Beach Island, NJ, 1976)

## Waves

Lapping waves  
With swirls of foamy white  
Rush over the  
Sandy beach so bright.  
The moonlight  
Now dances playfully  
On waves that  
Chant their song endlessly.  
Suddenly  
Silver mist parts the way  
Of black night.  
Dawn brings forth a new day:  
Rosy streaks  
Of morning's early light  
Say, "Sunrise.  
Day is here; gone is the night."

## **Good Morning, Daisy** (Tribute to a Sunrise)

I came to open the day  
with you. My eyes  
wait to see you rise.

First, you put your shadow on:  
heliotrope, mauve,  
luscious gold above,  
against the blue of your face.  
Your rays—lashes—  
brush makeup, slashes  
signing your opening lid.  
Your iris edge  
creeps behind the ledge  
of cloud: gold, like its streak above.  
Your single eye  
makes sightless, blinds my  
two. I blink, and still you're there,  
behind my lids,  
your rays now my grids.

Your orb becomes my beacon  
here, everywhere.  
Thank you for soul air.

(Long Beach Island, NJ, 1976. Scott, too tired from clamming to rise early on the day of departure, heard about this spectacular event from his more energetic mother.)

## After Divorce

I never wanted to get married again—it's too complicated, who were men anyway? and what do they want? (besides the obvious)—for a few months anyway.

Until I met Jerry, cute, blondish, at Parents Without Partners (an ersatz dating service), a good dancer at Opus, then at his house at a PWP discussion meeting. Later he invited me to another meeting at his house, saying, somewhat seductively, "You have to come. It'll be exciting."

Exciting it was not.

It was Amway, trying to get us attendees to become representatives. He fell in love with Amway—damn! Amway, shmam-way, scram-way.

So the hankerin' began.

Next a guy a mutual friend tells me I just have to meet, also at PWP, insisting we were just right for each other, looks me over, says, "I thought you'd be younger" (me that just dyed the gray away!).

His loss, I think.

Then I talk to a swimmate at the "Y," he seeming needy. He asks to see me, and we go to a movie a night or two later, first time a man's been in the house since the other left. My thirteen-year old, in his wisdom, asks "Who is this guy? Where are you going? What time will you be back?"

Needy wanted to see a scary movie (not my type), then needed to leave before it ended. On the second date – Scott still very wary and adding I’d better be back before nine—he wants to see *The Omen*, a story of the 666’s on the forehead, a scary dog, and other forebodings. Again, though we sit near the back, he wants to leave early. But I insist, intrigued by the evil Gregory Peck, and we stick it out.

At home, Scott has disappeared (to a friend’s, I imagine) and needy wants to see something on t.v., so we go to the basement den where his needs become apparent. Greta, the Weimaraner, has been suspicious all along, too, and, smelling trouble, noses her way between us. He being scared of dogs, especially after *The Omen*, flees, never again to be seen or heard.

Now *I* am scared. Of my judgment, my needs, or are they wants?

I founded Divorce Adjustment Groups at church for the community (for my own adjustment as much as others’), and one night in about the third offering of the course, while discussing singles’ places to go on the dreaded Friday night, I mention Opus at the Unitarian Church and say I will be there so you’ll know somebody. I’d not gone back for some weeks, though it’s a good program of discussion, dancing, wine-and-cheesing.

That October Friday none from the group show up so I sit next to a man who says, “If you’re going to sit here, you have to behave,” and that begins the second man to come to my house, that evening



when we leave Opus early, the next evening,  
and the next five over the phone.

By the seventh day we know we will marry, though he takes his time. "We'll get the ring before Christmas so, when we go to Ohio, my daughters know my intentions. And we'll set January twentieth as the date. That's my anniversary, and I don't want to forget ours. Oh, I guess I didn't ask you yet: Will you marry me?"

"Of course. What took you so long?"

Then another question. "Remember I told you I had a date for tomorrow in Philadelphia, through the personals ad placed before last Friday? Well, I need a ride to the train station."

"No problem," I say. "What time, and I can pick you up, too, if—"

"Burgess!" Keith explodes. "I don't believe you: you just asked this woman to marry you, and now you're asking her to take you to meet another woman!"

It was clear I did want to get married again, after all. Life would be more exciting, in spite of Scott and the Weimaraner.

## To My Son, Before You Fall in Love

Before you walk in the garden, give thought to the many flowers scenting your way. Know that beauty, like roses, has thorns, and—like the pear cactus (a very hardy sort)—has pricklies. Don't ignore thorns and pricklies—we often need such harshness. Just be sure you get some sweetness, some gentleness, with them.

The orchids are lovely, highly prized, rare indeed, requiring much care in feeding, light, and temperature. However, they—the species, I believe—have no scent and their outer petals are waxy-coated for protection.

Their name, son—get this—in Greek is *orchis*, which means—get this!—"testicle"! Do you really need a third one of those?

My mild advice is to avoid those rare, most-beautiful-of-all blooms. Beware the lure of exotica. You don't need that kind of beauty and endless tending, only to be corrupted by it all.

There are lowly dandelions, *tooth of the lion*, so perhaps they bear watching at times, those humble weeds you brought in fistfuls when you were five. I don't think you ever noticed how they stink, how their green stems stain the hands, how their delicate yellow petals stain your nose if you try to sniff them. When you brought them and we thrust them into cool water, neither did I.

Pansies for thought,  
Forget-me-nots and Rosemary for Remembrance  
—worth considering surely.

Of course you already know to avoid the Venus Fly-Trap. Its sweet-vile stickiness traps insects and for good measure its barbed jaws snap tight, not to open again till its prey is dissolved and devoured, ready for another hapless victim.

Regard the sweet, sweet Sweetpea, delicate as life itself. Its tendrils may cling but only to grow, not stifle, to gain strength that you can give. It will reward you with trust: fragile but sturdy trust.

If you don't already know, a flower produces seeds, consisting, when "complete," of an ovary, a style and a stigma. As you might expect, the ovary is deep within, almost hidden, while the stigma projects upright from walls surrounding the ovary. It waves and attracts passing creatures that pollinate the bloom and cause fecundity to flourish. Stamen consisting of an anther and filament usually surround the pistil (like testicles!) and gather pollen also attracting bees and butterflies with drifts of pollen from other blooms, that diversity may feed and strengthen the breed—what a grand experiment in procreating this is!

I didn't mean for this to turn into a botany lesson, but beauty and tenderness are gifts meant to be learned about, protected, nurtured.

Before you pluck, or even consider plucking,  
think on these things.

Honor that beauty, trust that sturdiness,  
pay gentleness for gentleness, even for pricklies,  
if you can. Tend that tenderness.

Welcome and allow warm spring rains and  
sunlight to bring forth all that was meant to be.  
Yield and tend, for even sturdiness needs tending.

Treasure all the parts of this mystery between you,  
this needing and not-needing.

Keep yourself fit: strong, yet soft,  
for then when the bloom is off the rose,  
the pansy, the dandelion or whatever  
flower you have chosen and your own beauty  
will have gone soft,  
strength will remain.

And so, for a while, watch the buds unfold,  
caress the petals, let them gently reveal the  
flower's inner beauty. You will know when to  
help the process along: you were so tender  
toward your baby brother is how I know.

My word, my advice, if you want it:  
consider the dandelion over the lily,  
though neither toils nor spins.  
It just smears your hand with  
luscious golden pollen that you  
don't ever want to wash away.

## Acolyte

It's his big brother's wedding, and the  
thirteen-year old wants it to be  
perfect for his twenty-three year old  
big brother.

With years of experience behind him in  
lighting two very tall candles on the altar,  
he perfectly lights twenty or so pew candles,  
t-e-n-t-a-t-i-v-e,  
because it's his *big brother's* wedding.

## House Calls

Darling Charlie Francos came when nine-month old Scott couldn't breathe. He said, It's probably asthmatic bronchitis. If steaming in the shower doesn't open him up, go straight to emergency. Call me in the morning. A few hours later, he calls. How is he? he asks. He calls again the next morning before office hours begin at eight a.m. (I didn't know who was ringing the bell at seven-thirty.)

He came when headache and fever were burning me up, every day he came usually between afternoon and evening hours, not waiting for a call. As my throat, nausea and vomiting worsened, he told Ted to get fresh oranges and squeeze juice for potassium.

Six days later, Saturday morning, he walked to the back bedroom, having come in the unopened door (Ted was at work). I was afraid I'd find you here, he said. Anything new? I shook my head no, except, I say, My stool is whitish and I have a bit of pain here. He presses over my liver as I wince. May I open the curtains? He does and opens my lids wider. Um. What I suspected but hoped not, he says.

You may have hepatitis, though usually the stool is black. You're sure? Pasty-looking, I say. I noticed my whites were almost yellow in the mirror this morning, I said. Go to the hospital, get the test, that'll tell for sure.

I call Mother and Connie, and they help me to the car. Mother had brought comfort foods earlier in the

week: tapioca pudding, potato soup with hard-boiled egg and parsley. Didn't tell they didn't stay down.

When the blood test is over, I need help getting up from the table, then collapse in Mother's and Connie's arms. After a short rest, they get me to the car and take me home. Dr. Francos calls that afternoon: It's hepatitis. Lots of rest, don't worry about eating just now, get plenty of water and orange juice. I can't swallow, I protest. I'll be out, he says. My mother could come back and bring me in. But, You don't need any more trips today, he advises and shows up a few hours later. You have ulcers in your mouth and throat, he says. Is the juice staying down? I shake my head. Water? Usually not, I answer. He pinches the skin on the back of my hand, frowns. Get plenty of water.

How are the boys? So far, so good. Ted needs to bring them in Monday for gamma globulin—it may prevent them from getting it or make it milder if they do.

By that evening and all day Sunday and Monday I am so weak, I decide if this is what dying is like, it's not bad at all, would even feel preferable.

Tuesday morning I can't swallow at all and fall on the way to the bathroom.

Soon Mother and Connie take me to the hospital (they should have kept you the first time!) where merciful IV fluids drip and restore so quickly it seems miraculous. By ten, when the nurse asks if I'm hungry, I realize I'm ravenous. Good sign, she smiles. She brings a hot pork sandwich, comes



back into my isolation again, asks how was it, and I say I'm still hungry. Good sign! The liver heals and rejuvenates itself, she informs. Your part is eating, especially a lot of protein, and complete bed rest, for many weeks.

The day I am allowed up six weeks later Scott goes to the bathroom, nauseated. We think maybe he just wants to dodge Sunday School, but then he proves otherwise with Saturday's meals where they didn't belong. Charlie doesn't come to the house this time. Let's hope the gamma globulin keeps it mild. Take him for the test tomorrow. The test confirms it, and though Scott's illness is milder than mine, it lasts longer—for four months, causing first grade to be taught by Mom at home.

Tom's case is even milder, just slight sore throat, but confirmed nevertheless. Ted escaped it altogether.

Many more times Dr. Francos came to the house, charging just a few dollars more than for an office visit. I like to know how my patients live, he said, how they decorate their house, where they put things in the cupboard, where the t.v. is. His soothing smile and sometimes sly, soothing touch, make him one-in-a- million, almost.

I was lucky enough to have another so competent and kindly. But that's another poem.

## The Musicians

Always a musical family—my preference was classical and my husband's jazz—  
Tom received his very own phonograph  
and toy piano when barely three.  
A toy drum set followed.

After seeing *The Glenn Miller Story* and  
feeling bad about Mr. Miller's early demise,  
he decided he'd replace him. That fall, in fourth  
grade, he chose trombone  
when free lessons were offered.  
In his small bedroom, he pushed the slide out the  
window to practice—till neighbors complained.

For several more years he took piano lessons  
and, when a teenager, guitar lessons for awhile.  
Then he taught himself.

By then his preference was The Beatles.  
“Will you turn that noise down, please?” I'd yell  
...till I came to appreciate the Fab Four's  
innovative style and asked him to turn it up.

His brother, who inherited the toy drum set,  
was not as fond of The Beatles. *His*  
preference was more for rock than roll. Like  
Tom he played the piano for awhile, and I learned  
he could hum a note and say what it was.  
I checked the piano to make sure,  
for though I could still play a little,  
I did not have perfect pitch.

Then the piano became a good dart board.  
Don't ask me why—we already had a real dart  
board. The piano bench turned upside down  
became a hockey cage.

When Scott drove us batty tapping his fingers  
during church, he became the owner  
of a *real* second-hand drum set:  
something had to be done  
to harness that nervous energy.

After the professional percussionist taught  
him for a year, he recommended we purchase  
an upgrade from a *music store*, not a want ad.  
Then his teacher put him on the kettles,  
adjunct to Scott's snares and traps and cymbals,  
all played in the basement.

Soon Scott was joined by two young budding  
musicians from the neighborhood who practiced  
in the driveway when I needed  
to take my afternoon nap since it was  
pretty hard for them to “turn it down.”

Sometimes the brothers teamed up in the basement,  
Scott on drums, Tom on guitar.

Best friend Rick and Tom discovered The Bruce in  
Asbury Park and became Springsteen groupies, and  
Tom eagerly said yes when asked to become sound  
man for a newly formed combo at the hospital  
where he worked. He also became sound man for  
Rick's folk rock group Oasis in Harrisburg which  
wrote its own music.

After many weddings and club dates, they cut *Common Ground*. The band insisted Tom be pictured on the album cover at the console as producer.

When the band jammed, or when out knocking down a few beers, they'd ask Turk the sound man to play piano. After all those years, he could still jazz up "Little Brown Jug."

His early exposure to the classics on the phonograph helped, but it's *Amadeus* and later *The Four Seasons* with Alan Alda and Carol Burnett that turn him on to Mozart and Vivaldi. He calls excitedly to invite Keith and me for supper, followed by the video disc Ode to Freedom concert of Bernstein conducting Beethoven's *Ninth* at the fallen Berlin wall. I can't hear that symphony without chills, historical and personal.

Tom and Rick began collaborating on composing. Their last, "Blue Notes," slated to be included in the repertoire and on the next album was read at Tom's service, and, to the sniffles of band members in the congregation, "Links in a Chain" from *Common Ground* was played. Bruce's "Born to Run" closed the service after we sang "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee" to Beethoven's "Ode to Freedom" tune.

When the blue notes flow,  
ain't got no place to go.  
Oh, the blue notes flow,  
sending out high and low.  
It hits you from behind.  
It's bittersweet to find.

There is a place inside  
where it is safe to hide.  
'Cause the blue notes always know.

Oh, the blue notes flow  
like seeds that you sow.  
Yeah, the blue notes flow.  
Your soul opens and grows  
'Cause the blue notes always know.

("Blue Notes" lyrics by Rick Stevens and Tom Warner)

## Sound Equipment

AM and FM you two start out

with un- and necessary parts

(some get jettisoned and some don't),  
making static music en masse

with no manuals or prototypes.

Legal tender you paid and pay

and fine cabinetry you get,

yes, but music gains most you learn  
from electric energy  
from beyond and,

later (repair shop trips,  
new parts adjusted to that sturdy  
fragile whole), later  
you're treble and bass.

(Tom and Deb were soul mates, 9/14/75-5/15/95)

## Addictions, I

In the seventies, his neighbor buddy in high school got into drugs, breaking Tom's heart as he watched his dear friend deteriorate. Troubled, he finally told me, and though I'd been sworn to secrecy, I persuaded Tom to tell our youth pastor who contacted the boy's parents through their pastor, so they were at least informed.

Consequently, Tom shied away from the hard stuff, though he'd started the nicotine habit imitating his dad at fourteen. We grounded him so many times, each time longer and longer, that he ran away, twice in one weekend. That Sunday the youth leader called from her house to say he was there and that the group supported us.

Months later, Tom returned from an Encounter Group youth retreat weekend, quiet and sober. At supper he asked if he could talk with us sometime. I too had had the Encounter Group experience at a church council retreat and knew how confessions could pop out in a trusting environment. Now, I wondered, even though he'd not seriously dated yet:

Has he gotten some girl pregnant?

"Mom and Dad," he began, "I think we have a good relationship except for one thing, smoking. I appreciate what you're doing, but it isn't working.

And I don't know what we can do about it."

His father and I heaved a mutual sigh, tired of playing nicotine cops, but didn't know how to retreat.

Now we'd been freed to lay down rules Tom agreed to, beginning a whole new mutually respectful phase in our relationship.

Later after several warnings, he got suspended in his junior year and could only be reinstated if a parent accompanied him to talk with the principal. The principal asked Tom, not ordinarily a rule-breaker, why he smoked. He replied simply, "It makes me feel good," and I knew he was hooked.

When he roomed with five other guys at Bell & Howell and the alcohol flowed and the pot wafted, he was bothered, though he tried both of course. For his twenty-first birthday, August 27, 1973, he asked to have a party with alcohol, so we laid down rules again. Only one party-goer had to be stopped and driven home.

As a hospital electrician he witnessed many smokers suffering from lung and heart disease and determined to quit. The best he could do was switch to lights.

In two years he married sweet, serious, and always sober Debbie. When he inherited an ancient Kelvinator from his grandmother, he had a tap inserted for sensible keg parties at their home.

Three years later after a horrible breakdown and finally getting accurately diagnosed with bi-polar disorder, the kind and gentle doctor warned alcohol or pot did not mix well with Lithium. Fortunately, it was not difficult for Tom to abstain.



The coroner asked Debbie if her husband was a smoker, as the autopsy report showed Tom's 43-year old arteries were quite clogged.

Which is worse—marijuana, cocaine, heroin, alcohol, or nicotine—I don't know. They're all demons.

## Addictions, II

We take him and friend to the police station, as warned,  
when caught with pot. Also we manage the money he  
earns bus-boying for a restaurant and tell him his life—  
clothing and room and telephone calls—is subject  
to invasions of privacy.

The threats worked for a while  
but cigarettes and beer join the scene as well.  
Then when his fiancée jilts him  
he progresses to cocaine obtained by pot-sellers and  
maybe by those he befriends and loans money to  
like Jose who tells the addict's mom  
he'd do anything for that guy.

After eight years Scott goes cold turkey without help.  
(A counselor tells the addict's mom  
that's almost impossible to do.)

A year later he marries dear Denise and another year later in  
a trail bike accident he breaks his shoulder and  
crushes all ribs on his left side and punctures his lung.

He itches to get back to work. His orthopedist says  
Okay, just don't lift over ten pounds and his boss says  
No problem. After minutes-long look at the  
physician's report and X-rays the company doctor writes  
Totally disabled.

Devastated  
he develops ulcerative colitis.

When he *almost* gets another job  
the colitis returns big time  
the colon perforates and his entire colon is removed.

He's later diagnosed with Crohn's Disease  
in his small intestine.

Jack Daniels and Buds and Gallos  
*seem* to take depression and pain away  
only for them to return big-time.

Bi-polar syndrome is next—more doctor medication  
and more self-medication.

Many start praying and he gives up Jack Daniels.

Two years later he gives up everything else  
Monday through Friday but likes Buds  
for football and hockey on weekends.  
Till tremors hit on Thursdays  
tremors of arms and legs.

Cold turkey again  
again by himself—  
it *seems* it's by himself.

Escaping after thirty`years of abuse  
with only mild liver damage is a blessing. You  
could almost say he lives a charmed life.

And yet, with addiction, you never know...

## Skydiving

*July, 1985, ca 2 p.m.—*

“Hi, Mom! How ya doing?” “Fine, Honey, how’re you?” “Good, good.” Slight pause. “Mom, are you sitting down?”

Omigod. Karen’s pregnant. Karen a live-in, rescued when Scott overheard at the Turkey Hill she had a P.F.A. on her boyfriend and needed a place to live...almost seemed like a rebound after Beth jilted him.

Oh, no! He got arrested for D.U.I. No, please God, no! he’s got CANCER!—that’s what that stomach ache last week was all about!...

“Mom? You okay?” Slight pause.

“Yeah, yeah, just waking up. Yeah, I’m lying down, not sitting down. What’s up?”

“I jumped from an airplane today.”

“You what?”

“I jumped from an airplane!”

“You okay?” Foolish question. We were talking.

“I bet it was fun.” “A thrill, Mom. Really fun.”

“That’s great, Honey. Nice day, too.”

That’s one reason we jumped today...

thirty hours of instruction, static line jump...I didn't have to pull the ripcord... Dave...and I and five others...yeah, Mom, probably next week, depends on the weather, 'course... after five statics we do free fall."

"Would love to see it..." "...let you know."

So, not a grandma again.

*August, 1985—*

Gorgeous day. Keith and I have no trouble finding Maytown (we eat at The Inn every anniversary) and ask a question of a local to find the airport. Dave and Scott greet us. "Just packed my 'chute ...yeah, passed the written exam last week, more jumps from the 'frame'. Packed our own, didn't we, Dave?" "Yeah, a little help..."

"Time to go. See you soon!"

I hope to God. "Yeah. How'll I know which is you—so I can get a picture?" "I should be the fifth jumper if no one panics ahead of me!"

"Good luck, Sweetheart!"

"Thanks, Mom. We need it!"

*November, 1985—*

"Good chicken, Mom." "Thanks, been wanting to try that new recipe. When you jumping again?"

"Won't be till next spring now."

Slight pause. "Have to tell you something. When you first called and asked if I was sitting down?" Nods, with mouth full. "I thought you were going to say Karen was pregnant."

"Mom, Karen had to have a hysterectomy years ago."

"Oh! Why didn't you (mouth full) tell me?"

"Mom, I went skydiving..." "It sure looked like fun. You always were a risk-taker, I mean anyone who has pucks knocked at him at a hundred miles an hour when he's only nine and does it for seven years! I mean, skydiving sure looked like fun..."

Yeah, that's him, a risk-taker: there's marriage and children in his future yet... a grandmother yet.

## Sixtieth Birthday

As usual, Deb, Tom, Keith, and I celebrate together,  
this time over weinerschnitzel, steak,  
pork chop, and sole.

There's a sweet card, and Tom says, "I don't know  
anyone younger than you. I don't mean just in looks,  
I mean in what you do and the way you think."

I open their gifts: gold circlets for my ears,  
scented candle and shower gel, and chocolate,  
always chocolate.

After we share desserts, Deb and I pack the presents  
in the pink flowered bag.

But, really, who needs gifts when your son,  
this son who calls you every week  
if you don't call him first,  
has already bestowed the best.

## **Eulogy to Our Step-Dad, 1995**

We loved you because you never gave advice unless we asked. Then, typically, it was laced with experience, wisdom, humor.

We loved it when you became friends with our father,  
a rare thing indeed.

You had many fine qualities,  
but the one we admire and treasure most and will remember forever is integrity.



## Light

I never knew how important it was till my  
daughter-in-law stayed with me because  
of the fumes in her house.

She didn't need it for reading—  
with her lack of concentration—  
but for breathing.

We've always known it's life-giving,  
sprouting seedlings and making corn tassles  
wave in the wind.

But now I know I'll suffocate without it,  
thanks to Debbie, and Tom too who had a hand  
in this, for now he sees the Light,  
and to God who gave it—first day, was it?

No matter, it'll be there when we're ready to say  
good-bye to the dark, guiding the way,  
ushering us down the aisle  
all the way Home.

## To a Son After His Death

Are you reduced now

to this computer file labeled "Tom" for entries,  
comments, thank-you's,

to this small pile of clippings, newspaper  
obituaries to send to distant friends and  
relatives to make it real (your brother  
brought home the extra papers—  
you'd be proud he remembered),

to forty-three years of shaping, discovering  
who you are—excuse me, were—

to this weight permanently impressed into arms  
still cradling your infant warmth,

to this heavier-than-I-expected box—yes, I  
will open it tomorrow  
or next week or next year,

to this emptiness deep in my center where your  
life began?

## Baptism, After a Suicide

Stained glass, marble font, holy water...  
remembering still such comforting weight,  
babe in my arms,  
remembering still exquisite weight, his  
pale body in peaceful repose,  
pieta in a garage.

Unbearable weight still, this pain  
I might have spared.

God!

    Your own

Son

    you could not save but gave.

    You weep too

    these tears of holy water,

    and now gifts of the

Holy Spirit,

    comfort, grace, mercy

    fill me, free me.

Blessed Trinity.

## Good-Bye, Tom

We've already said good-bye to your smile,  
that sparkle in your eye and  
infectious laugh,  
good-bye to the sound of your voice,  
your words of encouragement,  
to hugs, gentle and warm.

We've already said good-bye to the belief  
that we'd have you forever.

We've said hello to memories  
more precious than the heart can bear  
of honesty, wit, and compassion,  
of struggle and pain,  
determination, acceptance,  
courage and sacrifice,  
and the sweet joy of your music,

Hello to pain born from love whose size  
we never knew.

We'll never say good-bye to memories  
but today we bid farewell to what's left,  
ashes to ashes, dust to dust,  
good-bye to questions without answers,  
grateful you've found peace in a home  
more lovely than any we've yet shared.

We say good-bye today only because  
someday, once more,  
we'll say hello.

## Prayer

“Oh, God!” is what you say in distress,  
not for some picayunish thing like a flat tire  
or your brakes failing,  
when you’re “laughing” at a flat joke,  
when your pencil point breaks in the middle of a note,  
when you mis-take “define” for “divine”  
and you think you’re going blind.

No-no-no!

It’s what you say when you get the divorce papers,  
when the undertaker calls to say it’s impossible  
to cremate your wife’s remains,  
when your child is found dead.

And you don’t say “Oh, God.”  
You say Oh, my God.

## **Doin' the Turkey Trot**

Wing your arms out, push your neck in and out  
like a gobbler—even your little brother imitated.

It started on the diving board  
then anytime somebody said  
“Turk, do the Trot!” you always obliged,  
gobbling up our hearts.

Then again you gobbled up our hearts by that brave  
thing you did in the garage.

But now we dance and include  
hip wiggles  
shoulder shrugs  
knee bounces  
pirouettes  
toe wiggles  
though they're hard to do  
on a full stomach  
and empty heart.

## **Sr. Rose**

Sister Rose of the Adorers of the Precious Blood of Jesus and I meet at a Jesuit Retreat, taking a workshop on the “hard” emotions: fear, anger, grief, guilt.

When I confess my fear of Alzheimer’s, she exudes concern my way, and at lunch I learn she’s Director of Pastoral Care at a nursing facility near my home, and we vow to keep meeting periodically.

Anger is not the problem for me that it is for the men in the group (them having been told to be “strong” and “men” long before they are men).

Grief, another story. I don’t deal with it much better than fear, the double deaths of lover and son a year apart having made me want to give up, but I know Rose’ll be there for me.

Guilt, the “hardest” of all, embracing, as it does, the others and tending to cling—causing more clinging by the clingee to it, an evil, vicious cycle, as though that improves your health, is last.

Brother Paul suggests, for our quiet time, the passage on the road to Emmaus, reflect (as we did for the other “hards”) then write (again as we did for the others). When we meet for sharing time, he doesn’t ask us to share, unless we really want to, in his wisdom. “Bring your slips of

paper—just condensations—” he says, eyeing the reams some have written, “to the covered walkway beside the garden at four o’clock, near the grill.”

My “reams” are heavy—loaded with some years’ worth of pain, made more acute recently, from “why was I so harsh,” “why did I tell him” (in my sudden happiness) “that I may move away?” when I knew in my soul and bones, he’d probably never heal again from that shock he’d received eight months before from the transformer, when I knew how devastating fear of death could be, almost as devastating as fear of never getting back to work or losing your wife because of all this.

Then I no longer feared death, wished it would come, peacefully, like his had done.

I’m not sure I want to share outdoors even in that beautiful lilac-scented garden with the Virgin’s statue lovingly embracing all in her presence. But curiosity—perhaps an important “soft” emotion—and surely a sense of mystery drive me, and at 3:50 I am there, along with everyone else in the group.

No one speaks. A few nervous twitters when we wonder if Brother Paul is late. But soon he appears, matchbox in hand (but no bags of hot dogs or hamburgers). His solemnity matches ours. Who will speak first, I wonder. Surely not I, who spoke first of fear. Quiet continues to descend. Then Brother Paul prays a short prayer (Catholics



really can be good at brevity), and says we should place our guilts into the bowl.

One by one, not looking at each other, we follow his order, and he strikes the match. At first the fire does not catch and someone nervously implores God to “send us a little hell.” God listens, knowing we’ve all been in hell too, too long. And the flame catches.

We watch as wisps of smoke ascend, burning paper stings our nostrils, our souls scorched duly, our souls ascend with each small lick of flame. We watch, mesmerized, the forgiveness almost immediate, the forgiveness promised in our Eucharists and baptisms, our tears the only water we need to be clean now, till the flames slowly die, die, die, as do our collective guilts in a barbecue grill in a Jesuit Center in Wernersville, Pennsylvania.

## Ten Times Ten

Ten times ten, generosity comes and reward,  
unbidden. Ten times ten, comes healing  
and wellness, wholeness and health in tens.

Her shy husky voice asks if she can come, come  
to our first meeting (baptism by fire!). It's too  
soon, I think, but remembering pastor's anguish at  
this stranger's anguish, say, Of course. We  
want to have you. She says nothing,  
except, I'll try to be there.

Then a second impossible! anguish: this her  
first-born, not the last as at first, also by his own  
hand on a rope thrown over a rod, not in a closet  
as he'd found his brother for the tenth time (the  
last too late, too late to save) but in a hospital  
where he'd gone for healing.

I search for the "right" card and write only  
I weep with you.

I join the line to view, but break out when I see  
her, silent, on a couch, her husband at the other  
end, small and mute. I go and kneel before her, to  
speak gently. We talked, I say, and begin to weep.  
Thank you, she says. This is the woman for the  
meeting she says to her husband. He nods,  
speechless, vacant.

The line continues to wend, seeing a life so  
vibrant, so giving: to coaching, to jobs—he and  
his brother won a trip to Hawaii for their skill in

salesmanship, to wife and young sons, to teaching  
Sunday School. Many weep, unbidden.

\* \* \*

They come, one meeting after another, saying  
nothing, just taking in what the others give, who  
take them in in their hearts, their arms, their own  
takings-of-lives pain diminished, understood,  
healed as they weep too, not for themselves.

She speaks first, to thank, glad for sorrow shared,  
her husky voice penetrating, healing our circling  
hearts. At last, perhaps at the seventh meeting,  
from his small frame, he whispers,

I don't understand.

We loved them so.

His tears are our tears.

Jesus, and we, weep with you.

## Suicide Text: Required Reading

Everyone thinking of throwing a rope over a limb,  
loading a .38,  
ingesting some foul substance,  
leaping through a window,  
starting the Ford in a closed garage,  
or walking deep into the ocean  
should read this text.

It tells how many hearts can be broken  
(33,000 in a year times, how many friends and  
kin are notified) in how many seconds,  
which child will never be the same.

Indeed, as the song in *M.A.S.H.* goes:

*Suicide Is Dangerous.*

## Dave Grusin, the Gershwin Connection

Picture him bouncing on the piano bench, swaying  
his head from side to side, saying yeah, yeah  
(you're sure you detect it on the CD,  
no matter how carefully it's edited).

"Bess, you is my woman now," you sing—cars whizzing  
by—lamenting, imploring, with the  
violins' and piano's line, "you is, you is."

You hardly stay in the driver's seat with  
Fascinatin' Rhythm's piano-vibraphone riffs,  
snare's beats,  
bass bumping and thumping,  
counterpoint skittering and flitting.  
The best you can do as captive is shrug, rotate  
shoulders, shimmy, wiggle your ears if you can,  
tippety-tap your left foot.

Your son introduced this magic when he made that tape  
a few months after the electrical accident  
and before the carbon monoxide,  
the one positive he was able to effect.  
How did he summon that energy in the midst of a  
feverish malaise, when even smoking and listening  
to jazz or classics brought no pleasure for *him*?  
"Mom, I think you'll like it," he said  
with a touch of enthusiasm you hadn't heard for months.  
Why didn't it revive *him*?

Honky-tonk piano roll in That Certain Feeling  
(Gershwin himself playing) keeps the energy

going and what tune is that?—clarinet reminiscent  
of the wail opening Rhapsody in Blue, and more riffs,

a s  
e p w s  
l s and i n g

trombones blaring. “Soon,” says the label. Next,  
Dave and Chick Corea dueling on the keyboards—  
‘S Wonderful.

Here’s Our Love Is Here to Stay ineffable  
indelible spirit energizing the in-  
side of a Bonneville trumpet leaping a  
grand jete twirling syncopated  
arabesques with piano then guitar break-  
ing into joyous pas de deux  
connecting, still connecting.

Yeah, yeah.

## Answering Machine

The robot voice announces “You have an appointment on Friday at 2:14.” It’s good she called, I thought it was 2:15.

I never fail to check as soon as I’m in the house—  
and do the follow-up—for once,  
it said I’d better come fast,  
our Tom is dead! dead! dead!  
though the news is dispatched in doses  
(one doesn’t tell such stories all at once).

And another time it told that our Scott  
was being rushed to Hershey Med Center  
for emergency removal of his colon,  
which had perforated days before,

and before that, his lung and maybe heart  
had been punctured by the cycle falling on him  
when he jumped the hill the third time  
(the first two being successful—  
he’s not that reckless!),

and another announced his eight-year  
cocaine use and abuse, though now he’d  
gone cold turkey for more than a year,  
a cherished Mother’s Day tale, a secret  
revelation, because its honesty  
bound us together,

and another on New Year's Day, "Mom,  
I asked Denise to marry me last night!"  
I didn't have to ask her answer  
from the joy on the line.

So yes, I always check the answering  
machine. It may detail yet another  
thread of life, connecting to trivia  
and life and Being.



## High Days and Holy Days

Our nine-year old pyromaniac sublimates his urge by lighting four Advent candles for four Sunday evening suppers, then snuffing them.

He never receives an elaborate array of gifts like his peers but is merry with a dinky second-hand record player and later a Texas Instrument calculator, a sacrifice for his parents. Scott squeals at a new Matchbox or Tonka, another sacrifice, and builds a huge dinosaur we welcome to the family as "Mr. Foam Bones."

We celebrate the New Year by wiping the slate clean and put forgiveness on the calendar for a day and a year.

On Good Friday the fifteen-year old in all-but-total darkness takes the red votive from the chancel, slips on newly carpeted steps in new shoes to collective gasps. He recovers and we all sigh as he carries the Light from the world, not to be returned till Easter Sunday morning.

Easter doubts—mostly about whether Thomas really put his hand into the side of a *risen* Lord—infuse the air with wax and perfume and are this day left in the hands of God.

We see and hear and smell Advent through Easter, the Alpha and Omega of our lives.



*"Mary Burgess' poetry is of this world but beyond this world, deep but accessible, moving and delicate yet powerful, marked with a grace made sure by time."*

– Timothy Miller, Ph.D., Professor of English, Millersville University

*"Mary Burgess captures delight in small things as seen through the eyes of a child and delight in surprises in ordinary things experienced in unexpected ways: a sturdy old pine, a hand, a spider web, 'marvel of the universe.' She also writes poignantly about tests of faith, such as a baptism after a suicide and 'pieta in a garage.' Her poetry projects crystallized feelings into vivid, memorable images."*

– M.P.A. Sheaffer, Ph.D., Professor, Millersville University

*"Mary writes from her heart. Her words and phrases arise from the depths of her personal experience and empathy for others. Her writings are inspirational."*

– Larien G. Bieber, M. D.

*"To the hundreds of admirers of Mary Burgess in home, school, church, and family, she is a writer who cleaves to the heart and bone with delicacy."*

– Inez Long, Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year, writer, editor, artist

Mary Burgess, a retired Reading and Learning Specialist, has published *Explore: A Manual to Improve Learning* and *Handbook of Hope: First Aid for Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One*, as well as articles in educational journals and *The Lutheran*. In the past year she has completed fifteen novels, as well as a dozen short stories, and hundreds of poems. She also teaches inner city children part-time and teaches English to new citizens.



About *Handbook of Hope*...

*"From Mary Burgess's personal tragedy was born this slim volume of wisdom. It is comforting to read for those new to the raw grief which flows in the wake of suicide—and full of straightforward navigational advice."*

– Sarah Alpert, M. A., Grief Teacher

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